

Sheila Jackson-Lee

1950–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE

DEMOCRAT FROM TEXAS

1995–



Image courtesy of the Member

SHEILA JACKSON-LEE WON ELECTION TO THE U.S. HOUSE of Representatives in 1994 in a Houston district once served by Barbara Jordan. From her seats on the Science, Judiciary, and Homeland Security committees, Congresswoman Jackson-Lee has focused on the needs of her district, which includes a large number of National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) employees. She also has called attention to such national issues as health care reform and job training for working-class Americans.

Sheila Jackson was born in Jamaica, New York, on January 12, 1950. Her mother was a nurse, and her father was a hospital orderly. Jackson graduated from Jamaica High School and attended New York University. She transferred to Yale University and, in 1972, earned a B.A. in political science. Before receiving her J.D. from the University of Virginia in 1975, Sheila Jackson married Elwyn Cornelius Lee; they later raised two children, Erica and Jason. In 1977 and 1978, she worked as a staff counsel for the U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations, which investigated the murders of Martin Luther King, Jr., and President John F. Kennedy. She left private law practice in 1987 to serve as an associate judge in the Houston municipal courts. Three years later, she won election to the first of two terms on the Houston city council.

In 1994, Jackson-Lee challenged three-term incumbent Craig Washington for the Democratic nomination to the Houston-area U.S. House seat. Her platform reflected broad agreement with the William J. Clinton administration agenda—including the President's plan for managed competition health care reform. Questioning her opponent's opposition to measures that would benefit the Houston economy, Jackson-Lee defeated Washington by a 63 to 37 percent margin in the Democratic primary. She won handily with 73 percent of the vote in the general election against Republican Jerry Burley. In her subsequent five re-election bids, Jackson-Lee won by wide margins, capturing a high of 90 percent in 1998.¹ Jackson-Lee followed a succession of prestigious Representatives from

her district. Created after the 1970 Census, Jackson-Lee's was the first Texas district in which the majority of the voters were African American or Hispanic. The congressional seat for the district was formerly held by Jackson-Lee's idol, intellectual powerhouse Barbara Jordan, for three terms and afterward by noted humanitarian Mickey Leland throughout the 1980s.

When Jackson-Lee took her seat in the 104th Congress (1995–1997), she received assignments on the Judiciary Committee and the Science Committee. By the 107th Congress (2003–2005), Jackson-Lee was the top-ranking Democrat on the Immigration and Claims Subcommittee of the Judiciary Committee. She served on both panels through the 108th Congress. Also, during the 108th Congress, Jackson-Lee was assigned to the newly created Select Homeland Security Committee. Her fellow freshmen elected her the 104th Congress Democratic freshman class president. Jackson-Lee also was appointed to the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee. In 1997, she was selected as a Whip for the Congressional Black Caucus.

In Congress, Jackson-Lee battled GOP initiatives to reduce welfare. In the 105th Congress (1997–1999) she pushed for legislation to protect child support and alimony payments from creditors. As a cofounder of the Congressional Children's Caucus, she also sponsored bills to create affordable childcare for working parents and to strengthen adoption laws. Jackson-Lee spearheaded two legislative efforts—one to reduce teenage smoking addiction and, the other, the "Date Rape Prevention Drug Act," aimed at curbing the availability of drugs used by rapists. She also was a strong defender of affirmative action programs, arguing that without such guidelines "institutions are left to favor the privileged as they did in the past."²

From her seat on the Science Committee, Jackson-Lee tended to the needs of her district, too, pushing in 1999 to restore appropriations in a funding bill for NASA. Several years earlier she voted to preserve funding for the construction of more B-2 bombers, whose components are assembled in her state. She supported the 1999 Commercial Space Transportation Competitiveness Act, extending provisions in a 1988 bill to grow the commercial space launch industry.³ Jackson-Lee persuaded the Clinton administration to designate low-income neighborhoods in Houston as "empowerment zones," making them eligible for millions in federal grants, to promote business creation, job training, childcare facilities, and improved transportation.³

Jackson-Lee maintained that her advocacy on these issues was part of her job representing constituents. "You have an obligation to make sure that their concerns are heard, are answered," Jackson-Lee explained. "I need to make a difference. I don't have wealth to write a check. But maybe I can be a voice arguing consistently for change."⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Sheila Jackson-Lee," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 2 *Congressional Record*, House, 106th Cong., 1st sess. (4 October 1999): 9246.
- 3 *Politics in America*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 2001): 990–991.
- 4 *Politics in America*, 2002: 990–991.